Honolulutraffic.com  Response to City Lies on Rail Transit

This memo presents a rebuttal to various lies and biased statements made by Honolulu government officials on a recent PBS-Hawaii TV show, Island Insights. Our basic complaint is that the city keeps claiming rail would better serve our community than alternatives, such as HOT Lanes (High Occupancy and Toll Lanes), and now the city is trying to support their dubious position with lies and incorrect information, as we point out here. Comments in quotes are from the recent PBS-Hawaii Island Insight television show.

Main Lies by Councilman Gary Okino: “Rail, if you compare it to a busway or a bus system, is head and shoulders above something like that (busway) in terms of 1. speed, 2. capacity, 3. reliability, 4. safety, 5&6. capital cost, even, operating and maintenance costs, 7. pollution, there’s no comparison, there’s no comparison. 8. Honolulu needs to move, I would say, 200 to 300 thousand people a day and only one kind of system would do it and that’s a high-speed, high-capacity, rail system and that is why I am so in favor of it.”

Lie 1: Speed?
The city’s alternatives analysis shows that for the 19 miles from Kapolei to Downtown it’s going to take 65 minutes by train. That’s 20 miles per hour. He’s saying 19 miles in 65 minutes. The alternatives analysis, that’s the official assessment of what it will take with the rail line. Trains stop at every station, which is like elevators in thirty-story buildings stopping at every floor. This makes the trains quite slow. For example, from Kapolei to Downtown, a distance of 19 miles, the journey by train is forecast by the City’s Alternatives Analysis (page 3-11) to take 49 minutes if you drive to the station or 65 minutes if you walk/bus to the station – found in the City’s Alternatives Analysis (page 3-11) http://www.honolulutraffic.com/more_info/library/files/Alternatives_Analysis_Chapter3_to_End.pdf This agrees with federal government data showing urban transit trains averaging only 23.5 mph. There is no “whoosh” with trains. On the other hand, buses on uncongested High-Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes will average 60 mph and then 15-20 mph in normal traffic. It does not take much of the journey to be done on the HOT lanes to get an average speed far higher than a train.

Lie 2: Capacity?
The capacity of the projected rail line is 6,000 riders per hour in the peak direction with an ability to expand that to 10,000 per hour maximum. We can compare that to New Jersey’s I-495 single bus lane carrying 32,600 passengers per hour. In the face of that, it is ridiculous to discuss a two-lane HOT lanes facility, giving priority to buses, not having the capacity of a rail line. The Parson Corp. HOV Facilities Manual says of rail and busways that, "Both modes can serve the person carrying capacity needs of about any corridor in North America." During the non-peak hours there’ll be too much capacity if it’s a rail. You’ll have a 300-person vehicle rumbling through mostly empty every 6-10 minutes, whereas a common express bus can be coming through using far less energy and even more frequently or less frequently, as needed. www.honolulutraffic.com/passperhour.htm

Lie 3: Reliability?
The biggest problem with rail transit is strikes (and suicides). Strikes are a major headache for rail transit users in the mainland because every so often they go on strike. They’ll be out days on end. It takes them so much longer to get ridership back up to where it was after a strike. If you were to put in a rail system, whatever union is controlling the train is going to have an immense amount of power over the city. When a rail car breaks down the entire system will cease functioning, perhaps for days, causing major inconvenience.

Lie 4: Safety?
Gangs, graffiti and crime around train stations. It’s a magnet for this kind of stuff. Safe? All rail systems have to have transit police. Vancouver, San Francisco, Washington, etc… rail systems have transit police. We don’t have transit police on our bus system. Are police accounted for in the alternatives analysis as part of the budget? No, they’re not mentioned. We’ve brought that up. It’s an issue. It’s expensive. When they put in the blue (rail) line in LA the eventual bill turned out to be millions of dollars a year to put in a sufficient transit police in place to hold the crime down.

Lie 5: Costs?
Saying that the capital cost is less than the HOT lanes option (High Occupancy Toll) is also absurd. It’s really laughable to say that a simple, elevated highway built by the lowest bidder is going to cost more per mile than a non-bid, elevated rail line with trains, computers, transformer stations. Each station is 270 feet long, 50 feet wide with elevators, escalators, stairs and generators to pull the train to the closest station so that the people don’t get stranded between stations in a power outage. There can be no comparison. How can they be so off on the cost? Well, they have consultants who boast about being client-focused. In other words, they’ll do whatever the client wants them to do. And the client wants them to show that HOT lanes are not competitive with rail.

Lie 6: The city has exaggerated the cost for HOT lanes to $2.6 BILLION.
A comparable facility, the Tampa Expressway cost $400 million. When you’ve got a facility built for 400 million you cannot justify one for 9 times that amount in Honolulu. The 400 million dollar one in Tampa – how long is it? About 12 miles but it’s 3 lanes wide. The one that we propose is 2 lanes wide. The cost per mile of rail in Honolulu is estimated by the City to be the same as the Washington, D.C. Dulles extension. But the cost of a reversible expressway for HOT lanes is estimated by the City to be over five (5) times the actual built cost of an already built system in Tampa, Florida!

Lie 7: Pollution?
When cars are traveling at uncongested speeds, the pollution emissions are far less than on congested freeways. Speed up the auto traffic and we will get far less pollution. http://www.itre.ncsu.edu/ITREmain/research/documents/Emissions_Reduction-TrafficMngt.pdf
Efficient express buses that circulate in communities then drive onto HOT Lanes would attract more riders than rail, further reducing automobile usage and congestion.

Lie 8: 250,000 riders?
Currently, 7% of Oahu trips are by public transit. This would need to triple, to 20% to reach 250,000 riders, which has never happened anywhere in the U.S. or Canada. Nationally transit ridership share has been going down, way down, not up. At present only about 75,000 people per day use transit. It would mean increasing transit users by 300 percent when the population is only forecast to increase by 28 percent for 2005 to 2030. This means increasing
transit’s market share by 260 percent. Bearing in mind that no metro area in the country has increased the percentage of commuters using transit over any 20 years of Census taking Where is he getting his numbers? (ftp://ftp.abag.ca.gov/pub/mtc/census2000/JTW_Trends/PDF/FullReport.pdf) (p. 4-9).

Lie 9: Energy? Hamayasu: “Rail is better in terms of the energy consumption.”
Well-managed HOT Lanes can have a lower “carbon footprint” generating less carbon dioxide, than rail. Bus riders will use a high-occupancy lane going non-stop at 60 mph. Cars on HOT lanes will go faster and take less time on the road. Cars on existing highways will benefit from reduced congestion. Everybody goes faster. Two HOT Lanes carry as many vehicles as four lanes of regular, congested traffic. HOT lanes do not get congested, so the traffic is free-flowing and more efficient. Energy use at 20mph is 25 percent greater than at 55-60 mph. See http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/driveHabits.shtml for U.S. Dept. of Energy data. Construction of the rail line and huge stations would take an immense amount of energy.

Lie 10: Electricity?
Hamayasu: “…the kind of a power plant that electricity (for rail) is generated, they too can get into better energy or alternative energy sources.” All of Honolulu’s electricity is generated by burning petroleum, by far the highest level in the country, and yet the city’s cost estimates for rail do not even include the expense of building a new power plant, let alone plans for one that runs on some new, un-named technology. Battery-powered cars in the future will be charged overnight when electricity costs are at a a minimum, but rail would draw massive power during existing peak periods. The rail system will require huge amounts of electricity 20 hours every day, even if it is running empty. Each station will require its own emergency generator.

Lie 11: Okino claims Vancouver Skytrain is running a profit: “Last year it made 2.72 million dollars.”
A profit? Vancouver’s Skytrain is integrated financially with their buses, ferries, and other elements of public transportation. Fare revenues for Skytrain cannot be calculated since one ticket allows transfers between trains and buses. Their financial report does not break out separate fare revenues for Skytrain. Total subsidies for Translink were $236.7 million in 2006. Any talk of Skytrain making a profit is absurd. (Source: Translink Annual Report for 2006, page 16.)

Lie 12: Okino claims that in Vancouver “last year car usage decreased by 5 billion kilometers (because of Skytrain).”
The number of automobiles is actually increasing by 20,000 per year. This automobile growth is creating gridlock on Greater Vancouver’s road network, which has had no significant improvements since the 1980s. In Vancouver, rising congestion reduces quality of life and increases costs. Population has grown by 750,000 people in the Vancouver region over the past 20 years and is anticipated to grow to over three million by 2031. With a rapidly growing population twice our size, concentrated in well-planned urban densities, Vancouver makes a very poor comparison. Greater Vancouver residents consistently rate transportation as the number one issue in the region. Source: British Columbia Government program.

Lie 13: Okino claims: No bus system can recover all its costs.
Where do we start? Buenos Aires’ 15,000 buses are privately-owned and profitable. Atlantic City’s 190 13-passenger buses are privately owned and profitable. Source.
Not only are Hong Kong’s buses profitable and so are those of the rest of China. Source.

Throughout Asia and South America profitable bus systems abound. It is only through political choice that our bus system is subsidized by $140 million annually. In 1971 our bus system was profitable, but then the City took it over and began operating all kinds of unprofitable routes such as a trip completely around the island for $2. http://www.honolulutraffic.com/Pickrell_xv.pdf

Lie 14 Okino: “Let’s take Pittsburgh. They did both, an elevated busway and a light rail system. They projected 50,000 passengers a day for the busway. Their actual ridership today after seven years is 9,500 — one fifth of what they projected.”

The Federal Transit Administration’s website shows that Pittsburgh’s busways carry 52,000 riders per day — more than twice as much as carried by light rail. Source: http://www.fta.dot.gov/printer_friendly/research_4289.html

Lie 15: Okino: “For the light rail system they (Pittsburgh) projected 30,000 passengers. Last year it was up to 27,000 riders, up 9.4 percent from the year before. So people are actually moving from buses to rail.”

Pittsburgh light rail makes its forecast? The official ridership forecast was 90,500 riders per average weekday versus the actual ridership achieved of 30,600 — 66 percent less than forecast. Last year the riders were not up to 27,000 but rather down to 23,200, a significant decline from the 30,600 achieved in 1989. (Source: http://www.apta.com/research/stats/ridership/riderep/documents/06q4lr.pdf) National Transit Data Program. If we review the disaggregated ridership data for Pittsburgh from 1996, the earliest available from APTA, to 2004, the last official data, we find that bus ridership declined slightly less than rail ridership during this period. More importantly, the U.S. Census shows that in 1980, before Pittsburgh built its new rail lines and busways, 106,200 Pittsburgh workers commuted using public transportation. That declined to 65,500 by the 2000 Census. Source: Journey to Work Trends in the U.S. and its Major Metropolitan Areas. (FHWA-EP-03-058) page 4-9. This data is contained in the U.S. Department of Transportation report, Urban Rail Transit Projects: Forecast versus Actual Ridership and Cost (DOT-T-91-04), which shows the forecast (Source: National Transit Data Program at http://www.apta.com/research/stats/ridership/riderep/documents/06q4lr.pdf) As for busways: Source: http://www.fta.dot.gov/printer_friendly/research_4289.html Moving from buses to rail? Source: http://www.apta.com/research/stats/ridership/ Source: Journey to Work Trends in the U.S. & its Major Metropolitan Areas. (FHWA-EP-03-058) page 4-9.

Lie 16: Hamayasu also claims that “the public transit use is actually a 30% increase since 1995” But the broad picture, according to U.S. Census data, shows that from 1990 to 2000 there was a decline in people using transit to commute.

Lie 17: Hamayasu: “We think the new (rail) riders is gonna be in the neighborhood of 30-40,000 riders.”

This claim is based on ridership forecast by the consulting firm, Parsons Brinkerhoff, whose previous forecast for Honolulu were wildly inaccurate, grossly overestimating increases in bus riders when in reality we have seen ridership decreases.

Lie 18: Hamayasu also claims that there is a balance of spending for various transportation projects in the coming decades, stating “we’re going to be spending about 3 ½ billion dollars in the next 25 years on highway improvements as well.”
But what kind of balance is this, spending nearly 200% more ($6 Billion) for a rail project that might carry at best 10% of our riders?

Lie 19: Okino claims: “We’re projecting in some areas commute times to increase to three hours one-way.”
This is another scare tactic. The city’s own Alternative Analysis shows that the worst commute in the year 2030 if nothing is done, the no-build option, from Waianae to UH Manoa, would be 105 minutes, 40% less than Okino’s preposterous statement.

Lie 20: Okino claims: “In 1990 we did a... study which shows that even with a busway you’d have 60% of the people transferring....It doesn’t reduce transfers, it doesn’t reduce transfers.”
This is another red herring. The 1990 busway survey was done as part of the EIS for the 1992 rail proposal, so again, the mayor talked to his client-focused planning company and told them to make rail look good and buses look bad. They came up with a grossly-over engineered busway designed with elevated stations on it and no ramps coming down to the ground, so of course riders would have to transfer in such a poorly-designed system. But there is no need for bus stations up on an elevated busway. Instead, these bus stations belong in the community at ground level, perhaps at existing shopping centers and other busy gathering spots. One of the great advantages of an express bus system is that is will take riders from origin to destination with few if any transfers.

Lie 21: In the program, Toru Hamayasu belittles studies by Prof. Panos Prevedouros for HOT Lane ramps that would serve the route. After Prevedouros explains he has designed ramps he is cut off by Hamayasu who rudely says, “come on, come on, how, no, no, no, no, no, you cannot design, design it....No you didn’t do a design, you did a sketch, you did a sketch.”
Professor Prevedouros has studied such ramps as part of his design outline for a complete HOT Lane system. Unfortunately the city has never included adequate busway ramps in its biased alternative analysis, yet has the nerve to criticize an engineer who has done such studies. Ramps are an important issue that illustrate the advantage of HOT lanes over the railroad. Ramps along a guideway allow buses to drive on or off and directly bring passengers where they are going without a transfer.

Bonus Lie: Okino: “I never lie.”

BEYOND THE LIES: PROBLEMS WITH PROCESS and PRELIMINARY ENGINEERING:

The city administration is following dangerous, backwards planning techniques by proceeding with Preliminary Engineering before the technology has been chosen and before the Environmental Impact Study has been done. At this point the Locally Preferred Alternative has only been determined by the City Council to be a “Fixed Guideway” without yet specifying what technology will travel on the guideway. It could be express bus, as some Councilmembers are advocating, or rail, or something else.

The city’s planning procedure as detailed in the television program by chief planner, Toru Hamayasu, is essentially backwards, conducting preliminary engineering before the EIS is done. Why are we spending millions on preliminary engineering before the environmental impact statement even exists, let alone having it approved? We are spending a lot of public money without really knowing what the system is and if the system fits. The normal next step after the alternative analysis, which has been partly concluded, is the EIS. Once you have an EIS that is approved and signed by the Governor, the Mayor and the Federal government, then you go into preliminary
engineering. If for some reason we reject the EIS, the preliminary engineering could be useless. Thrown out the window.

Another problem with doing preliminary engineering is they haven’t even decided upon the technology yet. How can you do engineering if you don’t know what the technology is going to be? Rail would require one set of engineering specifications, whereas a bus guideway would require a completely different set of engineering. So what are they doing? It appears they have decided on the rail and that’s what they’re going ahead and planning. It shows that they are in a hurry to award a lot of money to consultants and, in turn, receive a lot of money in campaign contributions before the next election. It seems that near and long term political ambitions (read: sole-source multibillion rail contracts) are driving this whole process.

All of the above present serious concerns for Oahu taxpayers, who deserve true information, because we are the ones who would pay for it -- the largest public project in the history of Hawaii by far, costing the typical family of four about $24,000 to build and many more dollars to operate and maintain. Unfortunately the proposed rail would do little if anything to solve our traffic problems, but there are much better options. Contrary to what the Mayor publicly declares, rail is not a “done deal.”

Our position is that we should instead build a new elevated structure for HOT lanes from the Leeward side that would be used by a mix of express buses and carpools that ride free, along with some toll-paying automobiles. The city has consistently failed to study HOT Lanes as an alternative, despite their many advantages, which include lower costs and much more efficiency than rail.